



Rise Up
Southeast Michigan Synod • ELCA

CHURCH SAFE START PLAN

May 15, 2020

Dear Friends of Southeast Michigan,

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

This document contains protocols we believe are both necessary and helpful for you to study and implement as congregational leaders begin making plans for an eventual return to corporate worship inside their buildings. It has been developed in consultation with other teams writing similar documents as we all try our best to protect the health and safety of those given into our care. This document also recognizes that many of our members are part of the group considered most “vulnerable” to the effects of COVID-19, and also that a considerable number of our rostered and lay leaders are members of that same group. Finally, this document is meant to be a sign of our partnership, and reminder that the ELCA has its own process for making decisions that affect the lives and health of its members.

Although this crisis has produced a great outpouring of creative and new ministries, we know that many of our people are eager to resume worship together with their church families. At the same time, we are painfully aware that Michigan has one of the highest rates of infection in the U.S., and that more than 4,700 sisters and brothers have already lost their lives to this disease. Further, we need to remember that most of those deaths have occurred within the territory of this Synod, and that the vast majority of those affected or killed were people of color living in the city of Detroit. This grim reality underscores the significant amount of work we have yet to do as Christ’s people working for justice and to fight racism.

The writing team also knows that the steps outlined in this document are tied to the Governor’s plan for a safe re-opening of our state. The protocols defined here may still require some changes as we learn more about the disease and how to prevent its spread. Know as well that a resurgence of the rate of infection might call for a movement back to an earlier step. All this is consistent with our understanding of Jesus’ command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

These extraordinary times have created a sharp and necessary break from what we knew, and the ways in which we used to gather. As we have been forced to make changes, we have learned that our congregations and our members can adapt, learn new skills, and that we place a high value on the “ties

that bind” us together as church families. Dear Ones, treat each other with grace and compassion. Please let this document be a guide toward a new and safer way for us to gather, to worship, and to affirm that Christ’s church and the Gospel we proclaim have a vital place in our communities, our Synod, and the world.

With prayers for all those affected and hope for all those working to find a cure for this illness, “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you....” (Philippians 1:3)

Grace and peace,

Bishop Donald P. Kreiss

Updated June 4, 2020

Introduction

According to the MI Safe Start Plan we have been through Phases 1, 2, & 3. On June 1, 2020 the State of Michigan ended the Stay Home/Stay Safe Order and moved the whole state to Phase 4 with this Executive Order: https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499_90705-530620--,00.html The Executive Order also allows for gatherings of under 100 people outside. These updated guidelines address the possibility of outdoor worship during Phase 4.

The following guidelines are written to be in-line with:

- Guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)
- The MI Safe Start Plan
https://www.michigan.gov/documents/whitmer/MI_SAFE_START_PLAN_689875_7.pdf
- Guidance from Michigan County Health Officials
- Guidance from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)
https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/returning-to%20In-person-worship.pdf?_ga=2.204751765.44076872.1589380709-1265143632.1588607192
- Guidance from healthcare professionals within the Southeast Michigan Synod

Decisions to safely start church programming should be made by the pastor(s) and congregation council in consultation with one another.

We do not expect this to be a linear process. We may move into a later phase for a period of time, only to find out that the number of cases has increased and we are being told by the State of Michigan to return to an earlier phase. Careful attention should be paid to the order from the State of Michigan and updates to the MI Safe Start Plan.

Phase 3: Flattening

The congregations of the Southeast Michigan Synod should not plan to enter Phase 3 until directed by the State of Michigan. It is possible that some jurisdictions in our synod will move to Phase 3 before others. Careful attention should be paid to specific orders from the State of Michigan.

Key Considerations

- No in-person gatherings are allowed during Phase 3.
- Staff members are recommended to work continue working from home.
- In-building staffing should be kept to one person at a time and be for short periods to check mail, pay bills, and maintain the building. If more than one person is in the building at a time, all employees/members must wear face coverings. Sanitizing procedures for the office should be in place and done daily, especially focusing on high touch surfaces like light switches, door handles, copiers, computers, counter tops, etc.
- Any staff member who is feeling ill or has been exposed to COVID-19 should not enter the building until they are healthy and/or cleared by their physician.
- In-person worship is strongly discouraged. Online worship for everyone should continue.
- Bible studies/confirmation classes/small groups should continue to meet online.
- Church councils and other teams should continue to meet online.
- High risk individuals (those over 65 or with underlying medical conditions) should continue to shelter in place, including clergy and staff members. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>
- Graveside funerals of less than 10 people are permitted, with appropriate social distancing. Consider limiting attendance to immediate family only.
- Outdoor weddings of 5 people, including the presider, may occur with appropriate social distancing.
- Baptisms should occur on an emergency basis only.

Phase 4: Improving

The congregations of the Southeast Michigan Synod should not plan to enter Phase 4 until directed by the State of Michigan. It is possible that some jurisdictions in our synod will move to Phase 4 before others. Careful attention should be paid to specific orders from the State of Michigan.

Key Considerations

- Phase 4 allows for small gatherings of no more than 10 people (per CDC guidelines for small gatherings)
- The new Executive Order still only allows for groups of 10 or fewer people to gather inside, because gathering in an enclosed space still involves significant risk of the transmission of the coronavirus. Businesses like movie theaters, in-person entertainment, and gyms/hair salons remain closed. A case could be made that churches could consider themselves to be like movie theaters.
- We recommend checking with your insurance agency to verify coverage if you meet in-person during Phase 4, even for drive in or outdoor worship.
- High risk individuals (those over 65 or with underlying medical conditions) should continue to shelter in place, including clergy and staff members.

Office Guidelines

- We advise that staff members continue to be permitted to work from home, especially the immunocompromised, parents of children, and those older than 65.
- We advise keeping in-office functions as minimal as possible, only to ensure essential operations.
- Any staff members working from church-owned buildings must continue to follow social distancing and sanitary guidelines, including:
 - Use of face coverings
 - Maintaining six feet of separation between individuals
 - Regular handwashing and sanitizer use
 - Regular disinfection of common surfaces including doorknobs, countertops, and office electronics.
- Any staff member who is feeling ill or has been exposed to COVID-19 should not enter the building until they are healthy and/or cleared by their physician.

Worship Guidelines

- Churches may consider allowing a small team (less than 10 people with appropriate social distance) to stream worship services from the church sanctuary.
 - Careful consideration should be given to singing. One singer may space themselves at least 25 feet away from other worship leaders to lead music for worship.
- Any staff member who is feeling ill or has been exposed to COVID-19 should not enter the building until they are healthy and/or cleared by their physician.
- In-person worship, even in groups smaller than 10 is strongly discouraged. Online worship for everyone should continue.
- Maintain online worship and educational opportunities.

Drive In/Up Worship Guidelines

- Guidelines for Drive In and Drive Up Worship: Please note in the Michigan Safe Start Plan in both Phase 4 and Phase 5, sizes of gatherings are limited (10 people and 50 respectively) and even in Phase 5 face coverings are to be worn whenever possible. Social Distancing continues to be practiced. While being outside does mitigate risks, the greatest risk comes from the size of the group. Given these realities and a close reading of the Michigan Safe Start Plan Synod Guidelines for Drive In and Drive Up Worship remain the same through both Phase 4 and Phase 5.
- **Drive In Worship** is defined as an outdoor worship service using a low power FM transmitter to broadcast audio into cars. This is acceptable so long as leaders maintain proper social distancing and participants remain in their vehicles with windows rolled up, unless face coverings are worn. Participants should be encouraged to stay in their vehicles. Cars should be parked with appropriate social distancing maintained.
 - An open basket or mailbox may be made available to receive offerings.
 - In this scenario Holy Communion is not distributed as this would mean exposure for leaders and participants. Even using pre-packaged elements requires distribution which cannot be guaranteed to be handled in a safe manner.
 - At the conclusion of worship leaders would wave goodbye as people drive home.
- **Drive Up Worship** is defined as worship in which a presider is stationary and one by one vehicles drive up and Holy Communion is distributed. This is strongly discouraged due to the many opportunity for close contact (less than 6 feet) and the opportunity to exchange aerosols between the presider and people in the vehicles.
- In all gatherings, leadership should remember to care for their own level of exposure and potential viral load.

Outdoor Worship Guidelines

- The state's executive order allows for outside gatherings of under 100 people and we know that some congregations will be eager to try outdoor worship in the coming weeks. We make the following recommendations and offer these guidelines as a starting point for conversation between the pastor and the congregation council.
- Even if outdoor worship is offered, it will be crucial to maintain an online worship experience for those who won't or shouldn't attend outdoor worship. If it is not possible to livestream an outdoor worship experience, then a second recorded or live online service should be offered.
- Careful communication should be made prior to the service that personal greetings between family groups should be done from at least 6 feet distance and without touching. Our folks are going to be eager to see one another and will likely want to hug and shake hands. Discouraging them from these activities is very important. Signage/bulletin announcements should be used to discourage personal contacts.
- Consideration should be given to the technology and sounds system requirements to make an outdoor worship service edifying for those who attend.
- Consideration should be given to the effect of gathering outside to the surrounding neighborhood.
- Tents should not be used because they could limit airflow and could increase risk.
- The church building should remain locked and bathrooms unavailable during Phase 4, except for emergencies. Members should be encouraged to use their own restrooms before leaving home, but a bathroom with cleaning supplies should be made available to those who need it.
- Services should be concise, less than 45 minutes.
- Members should bring their own chairs/blankets to minimize the number of people touching/sharing chairs.
- Family groups may sit together, but should be distanced from other family groups by at least 6 feet.
- Face coverings are expected. The church should have a supply available for those who forget to bring one.
- Singing is still not recommended, even with outdoor worship. It is possible that one cantor, safely distanced at 25 feet could sing songs while others listen. Helpful guidelines on church music are found here: <https://www.wichurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Returning-to-Church-Church-Music-final.pdf>

- Those with pre-existing medical conditions or over the age of 65 should not attend outdoor worship, per the MI Safe Start Plan for Phase 4.
- Offerings should be taken online or via a central basket or drop off place. Baskets/plates should not be passed.
- Offering the eucharist is not recommended during Phase 4, even during outdoor worship.
- If the weather does not permit outdoor worship, members should be sent home and worship should not be moved inside.

Other Guidelines

- Congregations must follow all physical distancing and hygiene guidelines, including use of non-surgical face coverings. Please consider having a supply for those who arrive to your building without one.
- Buildings must be thoroughly cleaned regularly and between user groups, paying extra attention to high-touch surfaces. Please see the current cleaning guidelines from the CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>
- We advise posting signs outlining COVID symptoms and urging people to stay home/seek medical attention if they experience symptoms or feel unsafe.
- We advise maintaining appropriate stock of tissue, soap, hand sanitizer, and disposable paper towels for drying hands.
- We advise the consideration of allowing outside/other groups (such as recovery groups) back in on the condition that they are able to observe gathering limits and hygiene protocols.
- We advise creating an emergency plan for possible outbreak and how you might respond in care, in communication, and in cleanliness.
- We advise maintaining a visitor log (including phone numbers and email addresses) for all who enter the building in the event that they may have come in contact with someone with the disease and reporting is required. To the extent possible, the log should be managed by a greeter or an office staff-person or volunteer or follow some other no-touch method.

Phase 5: Containing

The congregations of the Southeast Michigan Synod should not plan to enter Phase 5 until directed by the State of Michigan. It is possible that some jurisdictions in our synod will move to Phase 5 before others. Careful attention should be paid to specific orders from the State of Michigan.

Key Considerations

- Phase 5 allows for increased gatherings of no more than 50 people (per CDC guidelines for larger gatherings)
- High risk individuals (those over 65 or with underlying medical conditions) should continue to shelter in place, including clergy and staff members.
- When deciding to return to public worship, consideration should be given to the realities of the spread and impact of COVID-19 on marginalized communities within our Synod, remembering that many of the essential workers come from communities of color in our urban centers. Considering that non-specific symptoms can mirror other more common illnesses, carriers showing mild or even no symptoms may be helping spread the virus.
<https://health.clevelandclinic.org/studies-show-carriers-with-mild-or-no-symptoms-are-key-part-of-covid-19-spread/>
- Please remember that many of our congregations are composed of individuals that meet the description of vulnerable population, including clergy. Re-opening might not be appropriate for every congregation.
- Limit events and meetings that require close contact.
- Events and in-person gatherings smaller than 50 people are permitted. We advise making every provision to avoid crowding.
- In-person meetings are permitted. We advise considering how you might enable your high-risk members to join your gathering online.
- Regular office operations are permitted. We advise considering how you might maintain flexibility for staff members, including clergy, that are high-risk or have children unable to attend school or access childcare.
- Communal spaces must continue to be cleaned on a regular basis, including before and after gatherings.
- It should be safer for Bible studies and small groups to meet in person. We recommend maintaining some online options for high risk individuals and those who do not feel comfortable being in public.

- We advise maintaining a visitor log (including phone numbers and email addresses) for all who enter the building in the event that they may have come in contact with someone with the disease and reporting is required. To the extent possible, the log should be managed by a greeter or an office staff-person or volunteer or follow some other no-touch method.
- We recommend checking with your insurance agency to verify coverage if you meet in-person during Phase 5.

Preparing the Church Building for Re-Entry

- Before any re-entry, congregations must deep clean the entire church building, including pews, bathrooms, doorknobs, light switches, stair railings, and microphones. Please see the current cleaning guidelines from the CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>
- Remove all non-essential items from any rooms that people may congregate in, so that there are fewer surfaces to touch.
- Remove any items made with soft/porous materials (rugs/chair/pew cushions), if possible, to reduce challenges for cleaning and disinfecting them.
- We advise posting signs and making announcements about non-contact greetings and reminders to refrain from shaking hands and hugging.
- We advise communicating with your congregation via letter, email, website, and social media before they arrive about the preparations you have done for their re-entry and to reiterate that, if they are sick or are of a vulnerable population, they should stay home and join online, if available through your congregation or another.
- Set HVAC systems to introduce fresh air into the worship space and/or open windows and doors to encourage fresh air over recycled air.
- Make preparations for restroom distancing. Limit the number who may enter at the same time, using tape on the floor for those waiting in order to maintain proper physical distancing.
- Provide hand sanitizer at all entrances/exits and in the pews/seating areas.
- Members should respect each other's boundaries and individuals should feel free to communicate their own boundaries around physical distance and touch.

Worship Guidelines

- Limit any in-person worship gatherings to no more than 50 people, or the maximum number for your space while allowing 6 feet of total separation between households, whichever is fewer. If you're AWA is above 50, consider how hybrid-worship or multiple service times might spread out the number of people gathered at any one moment. This might include multiple simultaneous

worship gatherings in separate areas of a church building with careful consideration given to entrances/exits for each group.

- All common surfaces must be cleaned before and after worship, including doorknobs, counter tops, pews, electronics, and sacramental items.
- Remove hymnals, bibles, and friendship (registration) pads, information cards from pew racks during this time and instead having single-use bulletins or digital copies for people to access on their personal devices.
- Physical distancing is required. Households must sit at least six feet apart, 360°, if gathered for in-person worship.
- Face coverings are required, consistent with Phase 5 guidelines. Please consider having a supply for those who arrive to your building without one.
- Worship leaders may not need to wear face coverings if they are over six feet away. Leaders may still choose to wear face coverings and must wear them during communion distribution and when they are in close proximity with others.
- Presiding ministers should use a stand for books rather than have these held by an assisting minister.
- Preachers and presiders should be mindful of physical distancing when speaking, especially because leaders need to project their voices.
- Encourage people to sign-up for services in advance while allowing space for visitors who may drop in. This will be helpful in maintaining a record of who was physically present in the event a case is identified and assistance is needed with contact tracing.
- Consider creating and assigning fixed seating to maintain safe distances.
- Singing is among the riskier behaviors when it comes to spreading the virus. We advise refraining from singing when gathered in-person or consider how you might take extra precautions to further separate singers from the congregation and from each other. Solo singers should be at least 25 feet away from the all other people.
- If conducting multiple services, the worship space must be thoroughly sanitized between services, especially including high touch surfaces such as the backs of pews/chairs.
- There is no nursery or in-person Sunday school or coffee hour following a service.
- There is no physical touching during the passing of the peace.

- There is no passing of an offering plate through the pews. Encourage worshippers to offer financial gifts electronically or to a stationary plate as they the worship space. The offering should not be processed to the front of the church.
- You may consider holding services outside for under 50 people, while maintaining appropriate social distance, and wearing face coverings.
- Maintain an online/hybrid worship option for people who are high-risk and needing to maintain stay-home precautions. If your pastor is in a high-risk group, this may mean the pastor is not physically present in the worship space. Provision should be made to bring the pastor into worship electronically, if necessary for her/his health.
- We advise setting aside special space within your worship area to be designated for people of vulnerable populations.
- **Baptism**
 - Keep baptismal fonts empty of water.
 - Sanitize the font and fill it with fresh water before a baptism.
- **Eucharist:** When the time comes for the celebration of Holy Communion in person it will be crucial to continue to observe very careful hygienic practices that protect all, especially those most at risk.

General Notes

- During Phase 5 Communion in one kind, bread only in the form of wafers, is strongly encouraged. Lutheran theology reminds us communing in one kind (that is with either bread or wine) is acceptable and appropriate. The crucified and risen Christ is fully present for communicants in, with, and under one element. For the sake of careful hygienic practice, it may be best to remind worshippers of this and encourage them to participate with the element most comfortable for them. Those who choose not to receive the sacrament should not be chastised in any way, but rather honored for their choice, mindful that Christ is fully present and active in the proclamation and hearing of the Word.
- The wafer is safer. Using bread, whether homemade or from the store, is discouraged for the time being. Bread requires more handling than wafers. Wafers could be handled with tongs.

Preparing the Table

- Those who prepare the Table prior to worship should think of their work in terms of food service preparation and distribution. People with food handling training in the food and beverage industry could be an excellent resource here.
- Communion preparers must wash hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds prior to and after preparing communion. Washing with soap and water is preferred to hand sanitizer.

- Gloves may be used to prepare the table, but gloves can be deceiving. If a glove touches a contaminated space and then a plate or tray, it still passes the contamination on. It is best to wash hands thoroughly and frequently.
- Plastic-wrapped wafers can be emptied onto patens without touching them. There should be separate patens for each communion assistant distributing bread.

When Presiding and Serving

- Pastor and communion assistants should wash hands before consecrating the elements and before distributing. Again, washing is significantly more effective than hand sanitizer.
 - The pastor should consecrate the elements without touching them. The fraction and elevation are optional and should be omitted for the time being.
 - The most significant medical concern regarding infection is proximity to others and breathing the same air. Consequently, however communion elements are distributed appropriate physical distancing must be maintained, especially since communicants will need to lower their face covering to consume.
 - Those distributing wafers should try to avoid touching communicants' hands as much as possible. For example, a gentle drop of the wafer into the communicant's hand will be better than placement. Hand sanitizer should be nearby in case a hand is touched.
 - It is best, for a number of reasons, for communion assistants to commune last, again washing or sanitizing their hands before and after communing.
- To avoid crowding and bottle necks, there is no receiving line following a service. Members should be strongly encouraged to leave the building immediately after worship.
 - Develop a plan for dismissing congregants in an orderly way to ensure social distancing as people exit.
 - Empower your ushers to remind participants about these guidelines and state requirements.
 - We advise developing a plan to reduce the number of doors that people must touch to enter your service, including the use of door stops.
 - Baptisms, weddings, and funerals may resume and must be limited to fewer than 50 people in attendance, while following distancing plans.

Outdoor Worship

- The same guidelines should be followed as in the Phase 4 recommendations.
- The Eucharist may be celebrated, following the same guidelines above, in Phase 5.

- Baptisms may be celebrated, following the same guidelines above, in Phase 5.

Summer Programming

- We advise against offering in-person summer programming, including Vacation Bible Schools and Mission Trips.
- Summer camp through Living Water Ministries has already been cancelled for the 2020 summer season. We do not recommend sending children from our congregations to other summer camps that may choose to stay open this summer.
- While the risk to children appears to be somewhat lower, there is an ongoing risk of carrying the virus back home and sharing with other family members. We advise considering providing an online or no-touch drop off at-home activities.

Final Thoughts

Please know these guidelines will be regularly reviewed to keep up-to-date with the best practices recommended by the CDC, MI Safe Start Plan, and the ELCA.

As the Task Force for a Church Safe Start, we will continue to pray for the pastors and congregation councils who will make the important decisions together on when it is safe to gather our communities of faith, knowing that you will make each decision based on the safety and well-being of all your members.

May God bless your mutual discernment,

Pastor Jonathan Heierman, Calvary/Clarkston
Pastor Jennifer Kiefer, St. John/Dundee
Pastor Lauren Kirsh-Carr, Southeast Michigan Synod/Detroit
Pastor Sarah Mayer-Flatt, Gloria Dei/Tecumseh
Ms. Robin McCants, LLM, Southeast Michigan Synod/Detroit
Pastor Paul Walters, Church of the Master/Troy

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